

"Too expensive," he explained. "Maybe they come when I make the Majors!" It is not so hard to see why he might have felt compelled to bend the rules.

As we see it, fans are well within their rights to condemn baseball players for the steroids era. From Mark McGwire on down, the cheaters ultimately made the decision to cheat. But it bears pointing out that Major League Baseball and the players' association created a system that gave many players the choice between acting immorally and, at least from an economic perspective, acting irrationally.

DO ATHLETES REALLY MELT WHEN ICED?

Does calling a time-out before a play actually work?

Plenty of field goal kickers have had rough games, but few have been so spectacularly bad that they've inspired an entire *Saturday Night Live* skit. It was during the 2005 NFL season that New York Giants kicker Jay Feely missed three potential game-winning field goals against the Seattle Seahawks. The Giants ended up losing 24-21. A few weeks later, *SNL* served up "The Long Ride Home: The Jay Feely Story." Feely, played by Dane Cook, is traveling aboard the team plane when the flight hits turbulence. He is asked to land the aircraft between two skyscrapers. Naturally, he drives it wide right.

Midway through the 2008 NFL season, it appeared as though Feely was prime for another round of mocking. By then, he was kicking for the other New York team, the Jets. With three seconds to go in an October road game against the Oakland Raiders, Feely trotted onto the field for a 52-yard attempt to send the contest into overtime. Feely went through his routine, struck the ball fairly cleanly, but doinked the kick off the goalpost. The Raiders crowd celebrated. Jets fans groaned.

But wait. Oakland's coach, Tom Cable, had called time-out

before the kick, a spasm of psychological warfare. Feely's attempt didn't count. After a brief pause, Feely tried again. This time, he drilled the ball through the uprights, sending the game into overtime. Afterward he explained that he happily welcomed the Raiders' time-out call. "I heard the whistle before I started, which is an advantage to the kicker. If you're going to do that, do that before he kicks," he said. "I can kick it down the middle, see what the wind does, and adjust. It helps the kicker tremendously."

The Raiders ended up winning the game in overtime—ironically, on a field goal of 57 yards, a heroic distance. But Feely was redeemed. And it was another bit of evidence that questioned the wisdom of "icing the kicker."

For decades, it's been an article of faith in the NFL that when Team A faces a pressure-infused field goal to tie or win a game, Team B calls a time-out to "make him think about it" or "plant seeds of doubt."

But does it work? Does icing the kicker increase the likelihood of a miss? Several years ago, two statisticians, Scott Berry and Craig Wood, considered every field goal attempt in the 2002 and 2003 NFL seasons, playoffs included. They paid special attention to "pressure kicks," which they defined as field goal attempts in the final three minutes of regulation or at any point in overtime that would have tied the game or given the kicking team the lead. Publishing their results in the journal *Chance*, Berry and Wood asserted that on pressure kicks between 40 and 55 yards, iced kickers were 10 percent less successful on average. (On shorter kicks, the effect was found to be negligible.) However, the statistical significance of the difference found—amounting to 4 kicks out of 39 attempts—has been questioned.

Nick Stamm of STATS, Inc., found that pressure kicks—defined as above except within the last two minutes of the game rather than the last three—in the NFL regular season from 1991 to 2004 showed an insignificant difference between iced and non-iced kicks. The conversion rate on iced kicks was 72 percent; for non-iced kicks, the rate was 71.7 percent. Stamm's work suggests that at best, icing the kicker does not diminish his chances of success.

We undertook our own study, using NFL data from 2001 through 2009 and using Stamm's standards for pressure kicks as well as some of our own—looking at kicks in the last two minutes, one minute, 30 seconds, and 15 seconds of the game. First, we looked at instances when the team on defense called a time-out right before the kick (icing the kicker) and compared that with instances when they didn't. We then controlled for the distance of the field goal attempt so that we could compare the same field goal from the same distance when one kicker has been iced and the other hasn't. Simply put, we found that icing made no difference whatsoever to the success of those kicks. NFL kickers being iced are successful from the same distance at *exactly the same rate* as kickers who are not iced. The following table shows the numbers.

NFL FIELD GOAL SUCCESS WHETHER OPPONENT CALLS A TIME-OUT OR NOT

PERCENTAGE OF KICKS MADE

| Situation | All kicks | Iced | Not iced |
|---|-----------|-------|----------|
| Less than 2 minutes in 4th quarter or OT | 76.2% | 74.2% | 77.6% |
| Less than 1 minute in 4th quarter or OT | 75.5% | 74.3% | 76.4% |
| Less than 30 seconds in 4th quarter or OT | 76.5% | 76.0% | 76.9% |
| Less than 15 seconds in 4th quarter or OT | 76.4% | 77.5% | 75.4% |

NFL data from 2001 to 2009, including playoffs.

In some instances, icing the kicker may exact a psychological price. In other instances, it may backfire, as it did with Jay Feely, giving the kicker the equivalent of a free dress rehearsal. In the vast majority of cases, the kick will be successful based simply on mechanics and how cleanly the ball is struck (and how well the ball is snapped and placed by the holder), not on whether the kicker had an extra 90 or so seconds to consider the weight of the occasion.

Former Tampa Bay Buccaneer kicker Matt Bryant in an interview with the *Tampa Tribune* summed it up this way: "I think when you're at this level, nothing like that should matter. If it does, you probably don't belong here."

Kickers aren't the only athletes opposing coaches try to ice. Take the waning seconds of an NBA game. A team is whistled for a foul. Just as the free throw shooter steps to the line, the opposing team reflexively calls a time-out to ice the shooter.

Just like icing the kicker in the NFL, it's a dubious strategy. We examined all free throws attempted in the last two minutes of the fourth quarter or overtime of all NBA games from 2006 to 2010 when the teams were within five points of each other—in other words, "pressure" free throws. When a time-out was called just before the free throws (icing), the shooter was successful an average of 76 percent of the time. When there was no time-out called, the free throw percentage was . . . 76 percent.

Next, we looked at only the first free throw attempt—the one directly after the time-out—and ignored the second since a player might have adjusted his shot after the first attempt or his nerves might have settled. There was, again, no difference. We even looked exclusively at situations in which the score was tied and thus a made free throw would have put a team in the lead. Again, there was no difference between shooters who were iced and those who weren't.

There might be valid reasons for a team to call a time-out before a high-pressure kick or free throw. The coach might want to devise a strategy to block the kick or set up a play in the event of a miss. The defensive team might want to create the appearance that it's doing *something* rather than standing by idly. They might want to ensure that the rights-paying television network has the opportunity to air an additional series of commercials—annoying the fans in the process. But they shouldn't expect the time-out to have any bearing on the subsequent play.

Icing doesn't freeze a player or heat him up. You might call it a lukewarm strategy.

THE MYTH OF THE HOT HAND

Do players and teams ride the wave of momentum? Or are we (and they) fooled into thinking they do?

In the sprawling clubhouse of the New York Mets, David Wright's locker is featured prominently, square in the middle of the room, near the front door. The symbolism is unmistakable. Wright isn't just a spectacular young third baseman and a handsome, genial guy born without the jerk chromosome. He is the face of the franchise. So it is that his locker is positioned in such a way that the media can always find him for a quote, teammates can observe how professionally he comports himself, and Mets employees can locate him when they need to corral him to meet with corporate sponsors or tape a promotional video or sign the cast of a season ticket holder's kid.

But early in the 2010 season there were few good vibes emanating from Wright's double-wide clubhouse stall. He was struggling at the plate: smacking nothing but air with his swings, grounding feebly into double plays, and taking pitches for called third strikes. After going hitless in four at-bats the previous night, Wright arrived for a late April game against the Chicago Cubs hitting .229,